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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001332

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LAF COMMANDER WON'T BE PRESIDENT, SAY MURR AND  
NASSIB LAHOUD

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In separate 8/28 meetings with the Ambassador, Deputy Prime Minister Elias Murr and March 14 presidential candidate Nassib Lahoud offered -- despite their deep political and personal differences -- surprisingly similar advice: the USG should not oppose the presidential ambitions of LAF Commander Michel Sleiman. Both concluded that, for technical and political reasons, the chances of Sleiman becoming president are extremely slim; his candidacy will wither naturally. But, until then, Sleiman's presidential hopes are useful. To maintain his viability as a candidate, Sleiman will strive to ensure that the Lebanese Armed Forces play a constructive role. If, by contrast, the USG is perceived to be blocking a Sleiman presidency, then the Commander would have no incentive to keep the LAF neutral. Murr and Lahoud argue that Sleiman might react to a USG "veto" by pulling the LAF solidly on the side of the pro-Syrian March 8-Aoun forces, just as security problems associated with presidential elections break out. That is not in the USG or March 14 interests. End summary.

MURR AND NASSIB LAHOUD OFFER COUNSEL:  
DON'T ALIENATE LAF CHIEF SLEIMAN

2. (C) The Ambassador met separately on 8/28 with Deputy Prime Minister/Defense Minister Elias Murr and former MP and March 14 presidential candidate Nassib Lahoud. Murr and Lahoud, both from the Metn region, foster mutual antipathy (which Nassib usually manages to mask) based in local and family politics: The son of a pro-Syrian MP, Murr was previously married to the daughter of Lebanese President Emile Lahoud, Nassib's despised cousin. Nassib Lahoud was an early opponent to Syrian hegemony over Lebanon and in 2005 ran on a (losing) parliamentary ticket with Elias's hated uncle Gabriel Murr. Despite these political and familial rivalries, Murr and Lahoud independently offered the Ambassador essentially the same advice: that the USG should not publicly or privately be seen as trying to block the presidential ambitions of LAF Commander Michel Sleiman. There is little sense in making Sleiman an enemy, particularly when the chances of him actually ascending to Baabda Palace are so slim.

CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT PERMITTING  
SLEIMAN TO RUN IS UNLIKELY

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13. (C) To have a constitutional amendment, Lahoud and Murr each explained, Lebanon's cabinet would first have to approve a decree giving the wording for such an amendment. The March 14-dominated cabinet is unlikely to do so. Even if it did, the decree would have to be co-signed by PM Siniora and President Emile Lahoud to be forwarded to Parliament; Emile Lahoud is unlikely to break his boycott of the Siniora cabinet by co-signing a decree. In addition, for parliament to meet before the presidential election season (beginning 9/25), Lahoud and Siniora would jointly have to sign a request for a special parliamentary session -- another unlikely development (particularly given Siniora's loathing of Sleiman and his fear that a constitutional amendment might also open the way for Siniora's arch rival Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh to become president). Finally, constitutional amendments must be approved by two-thirds of the parliament, a highly unlikely proposition.

TO MAINTAIN HIS CANDIDACY, SLEIMAN  
WILL REMAIN OPEN TO MARCH 8 AND 14  
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14. (C) So, our contacts argued, it is better for the USG to allow Sleiman's presidential ambitions to falter on their own. For now, the fact that Sleiman harbors hopes means that he will try to cultivate good relations with both March 14 and March 8 politicians, to maintain the viability of his candidacy. This is good news for the March 14-dominated GOL: Sleiman will make sure that the LAF remains supportive of the Lebanese government. As long as he feels he has a chance for the presidency, he will continue to reject ideas of a second government, a military coup d'etat, or other

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military-related options to Lebanon's political crisis.

IF USG BLOCKS SLEIMAN, HE WON'T  
BE AS MOTIVATED TO KEEP LAF NEUTRAL  
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15. (C) By contrast, Lahoud and Murr argued, if the USG is perceived as blocking Sleiman's candidacy, then the commander has no reason to maintain any semblance of neutrality. Murr said that he expected that Hizballah-Aoun forces would by October again occupy the sit-in tents downtown, in order to put pressure on the GOL regarding presidential elections. What, Murr said, would happen if the USG and others have to call Sleiman -- as we did on 12/1/06 -- to ask that the LAF protect Prime Minister Siniora and the Grand Serail from being stormed. Smarting from a USG "veto" over his presidential candidacy, Sleiman might respond slowly or find excuses not to respond. Lahoud noted that Sleiman is probably "75 percent March 8, and only 25 percent March 14." But that 25 percent, he said, means that the LAF still protects GOL installations from March 8-Aoun takeover. The USG should do nothing to have Sleiman become "100 percent March 8," Lahoud cautioned. Murr noted that, as presidential elections approach, security problems are likely to increase, at which point we need Sleiman to play a constructive role "more than ever."

16. (C) The Ambassador noted to Lahoud that March 14 politicians like Walid Jumblatt were publicly rejecting Sleiman's candidacy; would he give Jumblatt the same advice? Lahoud said that he told his March 14 colleagues to be silent regarding Sleiman. Asked the same question, Murr said that Jumblatt's reaction was not considered as significant as any USG objections, because Jumblatt is known to change his mind and would be expected to compromise after stating opening positions. The Ambassador also noted that the USG opposition to a constitutional amendment would preclude a Sleiman presidency without the need to object to Sleiman specifically. Yes, Murr agreed, but the USG position on a constitutional amendment is linked to our opposition to

foreign interference: Sleiman can continue to harbor the fantasy that, if he would achieve an authentic domestic consensus in favor of his candidacy, then the USG would not stand in the way.

COMMENT

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17. (C) One of the earliest advocates of a Michel Sleiman presidency was Elias Murr's father Michel. But now, we understand from Elias, Michel -- aware of how difficult a constitutional amendment would be to achieve -- is shifting to Michel Edde as his compromise figure of choice. This is but one sign that the momentum behind Sleiman's purported candidacy seems (as happens to many early front-runners and not just in Lebanon) to be slowing; Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, in a 8/30 meeting with us, mentioned Sleiman only in passing. Thus, at this juncture, we find Murr and Lahoud's advice to be sensible: there is no reason to alienate Sleiman by opposing his presidential bid when the odds are already stacked against him. If the momentum in his favor again picks up, we can revisit what we might say or do. But for now, consistent with our overall avoidance of getting drawn into the "name game" of presidential candidates, we agree that we should not be the ones who categorically reject Sleiman's candidacy. He would not be our first (or second or even third) choice for Lebanon's president. But his chances are diminishing naturally, for Lebanese reasons and without the need for our intervention.

FELTMAN